

Peoples Gas South Chicago Store

8935 S. Commercial Avenue

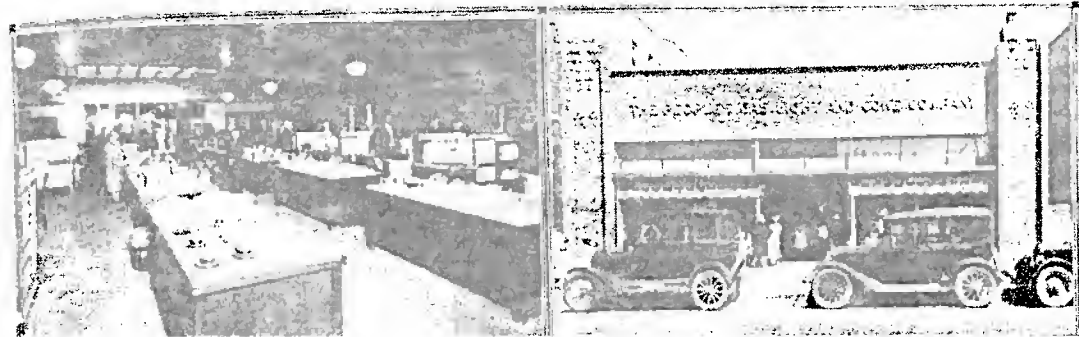
**Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in April 1985
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**CITY OF CHICAGO
Richard M. Daley, Mayor**

**Department of Planning and Development
J.F. Boyle, Jr., Commissioner**

New South Chicago Store Opened May 1



TOP: An excerpt from a Peoples Gas Light and Coke Company newsletter in June 1925, showing the interior and exterior of the building, shortly after its opening as the company's South Chicago neighborhood store.

BOTTOM: A 1986 photograph of the building, by Bob Thall.

COVER: A portion of the terra cotta detailing of the Peoples Gas-South Chicago building, one of the city's few surviving works by influential architect George Grant Elmslie. The building's detailing represents an outstanding example of Prairie School-style ornament. (DPD photo.)

Peoples Gas South Chicago Store 8935 S. Commercial Ave.

Date: 1925

Architects: Hermann V. von Holst
and George Grant Elmslie

The former Peoples Gas South Chicago Store is one of the great architectural treasures of the city. Designed by noted architect George Grant Elmslie in 1925, its distinctive front of brick and ornamental terra cotta stands out amongst its neighbors on Commercial Avenue as a building of unusual distinction and quality.

George Grant Elmslie (1871-1952) was a major figure in shaping Chicago's reputation as a creative architectural center in the early twentieth century. An immigrant from Scotland, Elmslie gained much of his architectural training as an assistant to noted Chicago architect Louis H. Sullivan.

While with Sullivan, Elmslie assisted in the design of many internationally acclaimed structures, including detailing much of the ornamental ironwork of the Carson Pirie Scott Store in downtown Chicago. After leaving Sullivan in 1909, Elmslie went on to a distinguished career with partners William Gray Purcell and George Fieck, and later in his own architectural practice.



Due to its design and detailing, the People Gas South Chicago store stands out amongst its neighbors on Commercial Avenue as a building of unusual distinction and quality.

Although Elmslie is closely identified with Chicago, the city has few examples of his work. Not only is the Peoples Gas South Chicago Store one of the few Elmslie-designed buildings in the city, it is also one of his best.

The building was originally erected as a neighborhood branch of the Peoples Gas Light and Coke Company, and used as a showroom for the demonstration and sale of stoves, water heaters and other natural gas household appliances.

Although Peoples Gas regularly used the services of architect Hermann von Holst, Elmslie was given complete responsibility for designing their South Chicago store. The choice probably was determined by the knowledge that Elmslie's talents would result in a building that would attract customers by having a distinctive presence on the streetscape.

The power of Elmslie's design is as evident today as it was in 1925. The street front is composed in a way that was both visually attractive and expressive of the building's structure.

The front of the building is essentially designed like a bridge placed lengthwise along the street, with bold vertical masonry piers at each end visually appearing as supporting buttresses for the wide horizontal masonry panel spanning between them. This allowed the space beneath the "span" to be filled with a continuous ribbon of glass, opening up the store's interior to the street.

Elmslie believed that buildings should be designed as a harmonious expression of beauty, structure, function and environment, similar to the forces of nature. He also believed that buildings should not reflect architectural forms of the past, but should instead be fresh, original compositions created for the specific needs of each individual project. His design for the Peoples Gas South Chicago Store is an excellent example of these theories in practice.

Although expressive of its structural system, the building was at the same time



given a warm, human scale through its richly-detailed skin of textured brick and ornamental terra cotta in earth tones. Many aspects of the design have parallels to the forces of nature, such as the plant-like vertical "growth" of the end piers, culminating in large blossom-like panels at the top.

The ornament itself is among the finest of Elmslie's career, combining natural and geometric forms to express the harmony between nature and architecture. Unlike most architects of the period whose buildings displayed architectural forms and details borrowed from the past, all aspects of the Peoples Gas South Chicago Store are uniquely Elmslie's own personal creation.

After the South Chicago Store was closed by Peoples Gas in the early 1940's, the building was occupied by a number of subsequent business, the most recent being the Family Market grocery store. Just as Peoples Gas benefitted from the buildings distinctive character in 1925, the strong image created by Elmslie still remains vital commercial asset for its present occupant.

A clay model of ornament from the Peoples Gas South Chicago Store, as it appeared at the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company factory prior to its installation. The ornament represents some of the finest work of its designer, George Grant Elmslie.



George Grant Elmslie, c.1930, one of the premier figures of Chicago architecture. Formerly associated with noted architect Louis H. Sullivan, Elmslie went on to a distinguished independent career. (Photograph from the Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota.)

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The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. It is responsible for recommending to the City Council that individual buildings, sites, objects, or entire districts be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law. The Commission is staffed by the Chicago Department of Planning and Development, whose offices are located at 320 N. Clark St., Room 516, Chicago, IL 60610; Ph: 312-744-3200; TDD Ph: 744-2958